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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000110

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/20/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [CU](#)  
SUBJECT: CUBAN OPPOSITION SHOCKED AND ENERGIZED BY DEATH OF  
HUNGER STRIKER

REF: HAVANA 107 ("CUBA BUTTONED DOWN FOLLOWING DEATH  
OF HUNGER-STRIKING POLITICAL PRISONER  
ORLANDO ZAPATA TAMAYO")

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Classified By: Principal Officer Jonathan Farrar for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. The February 23 death of political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo has both shocked and energized the Cuban opposition, but has not provoked large scale political unrest in Cuba or resonated deeply within Cuban society at large. State security forces have been active, resorting to short-term and house detentions and travel restrictions to repress organized activities honoring Zapata. Other than President Raul Castro's unprecedented February 24 statement (not published within Cuba) "lamenting" Zapata's death and a brief mention on a government website, the official media has remained silent. END SUMMARY.

MUCH EXCITEMENT BUT THINGS QUIETING DOWN

12. (SBU) After an initial 24-hour period in which elements of the opposition and public security forces bristled for possible confrontation, the situation throughout Cuba appears to be returning to the status quo after Zapata's burial. There have been no public demonstrations, and all persons who had been detained in Havana and eastern Cuba have been freed. There have been no further reported detentions. Despite this, there is a certain sense of momentum among the political opposition, with several prisoners of conscience and other leaders announcing hunger strikes and other activities to mark the seventh anniversary of the 2003 arrests that netted Zapata and 75 other members of the opposition.

REPRESSION AT THE BURIAL

13. (SBU) Zapata's burial in his hometown of Banes in easternmost Cuba was a tense affair. Witnesses reported a heavy police presence, with opposition members' houses surrounded and checkpoints at the town's entrances. High-profile opposition leaders such as Martha Beatriz Roque, Vladimiro Roca and Laura Pollan, along with several Damas de Blanco were allowed to enter Banes and attend the wake and

funeral, along with many local activists. Pollan told us that tensions rose when Cuban officials insisted that Zapata's burial take place within hours after his body had arrived in Banes on February 24, and the family pushed back hard. Roque reportedly told a Cuban woman doctor sent to press the case for a quick burial that she would "kick her ass" if she didn't leave the place at once. Eventually, authorities bowed to pressure and allowed the family to delay the burial until early in the morning of February 25. Despite the reported presence of 50-60 state security officials at the funeral and burial, both in uniform and plainclothes, mourners were permitted to march through the streets of Banes to Zapata's burial site, shouting "Long Live Human Rights!," "Long Live Zapata!," and other chants.

#### DETENTIONS AND HARASSMENT ELSEWHERE

14. (C) Throughout Cuba, Zapata's supporters were prevented from attending activities to mark his death. Human rights monitor Elizardo Sanchez told PolOff that he had received reports of more than one hundred detentions and house arrests in the hours following Zapata's death. In Havana, several small and disparate groups were detained en route to sign a condolence book in Damas de Blanco spokesperson Pollan's home (which USINT Pol Counselor signed on February 25 on behalf of the USG). Blogger Yoani Sanchez told PolOff that she and her sister were detained on their way to Pollan's house on February 24 and "roughed up" by state security agents, who released them ninety minutes later and apologized for the "misunderstanding." Opposition activists in Matanzas, Pinar del Rio, and throughout eastern Cuba informed PolOffs of police harassment, house arrests, and detentions. With the exception of Sanchez, however, detainees released from police stations reported a minimum of interrogations or harassment.

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#### CIVIL SOCIETY UNITY

15. (C) Zapata's death has uniformly shocked and outraged Cuba's fractured civil society, inspiring an unprecedented show of unity and teamwork among traditional opposition figures, bloggers, religious leaders, and independent journalists. Punk guitarist Ciro Garcia filmed an interview with traditional opposition leaders Juan Carlos Gonzalez Leyva and Pollan, and posted the interview on his partner Claudia Cadelo's blog. Yoani Sanchez told Poloff she had deliberately downplayed news of her own violent detention in order to avoid detracting from Zapata's death, and publicly showed solidarity with the highly-political traditional opposition leaders she generally avoids. Convivencia, an independent Catholic publication, organized a nationwide prayer circle to coincide with the time of Zapata's death. Meanwhile, political prisoners and other activists from all over Cuba began to report their own hunger strikes in protest of Zapata's death, including well-known afro-Cuban political leader Guillermo "Coco" Farinas.

#### RAUL REACTS, REINA RIPOSTES

16. (U) The official media has kept silence on Zapata's death. Cubadebate.cu, the GOC's primary internet mouthpiece featured a posting with Cuban President Raul Castro's "lament" that a political prisoner had died. The same website also featured pro-GOC bloggers maligning Zapata as a common criminal. The February 26 issue of Granma had an article on the "shamelessness" of the U.S. detailing prison conditions, including deaths, in the United States. Reina Danger Tamayo, Zapata's mother, reacted angrily to Castro's comments in her interviews with the foreign press, rejecting his lament and labeling the death of her son "premeditated murder." In at least one interview (with ABC news), Danger also categorically rejected Castro's claim that Zapata's death was due to U.S. government policies in Cuba, stating bluntly, "(the U.S. government didn't kill my son. This regime did."

COMMENT: DEATH CATCHES ALL OFF-GUARD

¶7. (C) Although the GOC response to Zapata's death has been swift and thorough, it has been calibrated, focused on preventing large gatherings and relying upon mostly non-violent means. Nearly all observers agree that the GOC did not want Zapata's death and that it was a result of gross negligence and incompetence by prison authorities and the health system. These two institutions are truly and thoroughly broken down. This makes it an extremely dangerous proposition to be an inmate in Cuba's prison system. There are dozens of political prisoners who are seriously ill.  
.FARRAR